

Wetlands Watsonville wetlands will be studied

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WATSONVILLE — Most sides with a stake in Watsonville's wetlands finally will be in the same room tonight, two years after attempts to bring them together began.

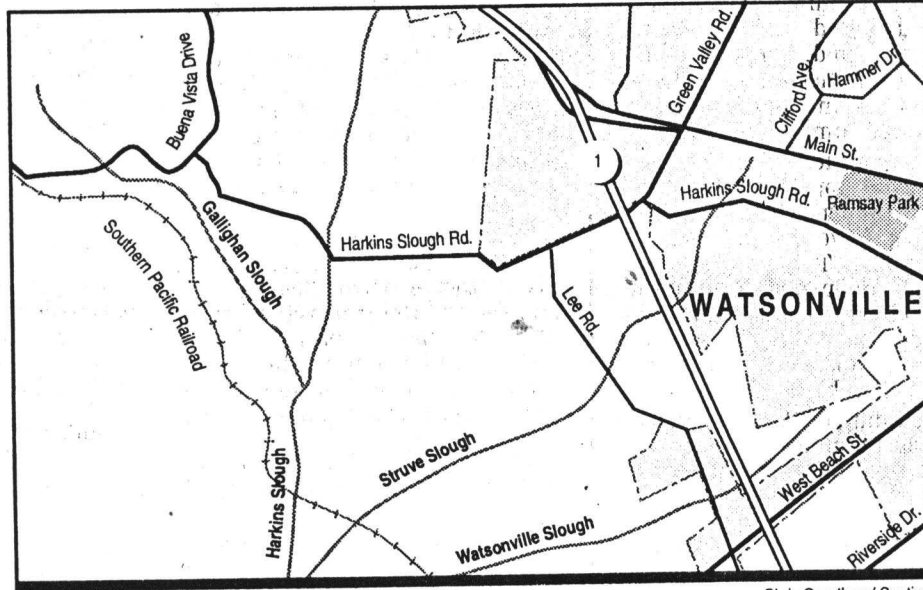
Getting those interests to agree on what to do with the 800 or so acres of environmentally sensitive land figures to be even more difficult.

Under the auspices of the Association of Monterey Bay Area Governments, or AMBAG, efforts have begun to develop a long-term management plan for six sloughs — Watsonville, Harkins, Galighan, Hanson, Struve and West Branch.

Some of the approximately 30 advisory-committee members want to preserve as much of the area as possible. Others are developers who covet the land for commercial purposes, especially housing that is sorely needed in Watsonville.

Also represented will be the state Water Resources Control Board, the U.S. Soil Conservation Service, the state Department of Fish and Game, the Sierra Club and the Santa Cruz County Farm Bureau, among others.

"The idea is to get every possible interest represented," said Jim Van Houten, a member of the committee and of Watsonville Wetlands Watch.



Chris Carothers/Sentinel

The first meeting is tonight at 7 o'clock at the Watsonville City Council chamber. The idea, Van Houten said, is to "make people aware of the study and create interest and participation.

"It's a whole slew of sloughs, you might say," Van Houten said. "They're pretty important and some of them are in bad shape and threatened by development."

Van Houten said Wetlands Watch

asked the city in 1992 to join the county to study the system, with an eye toward a management plan. The city and county chose AMBAG as lead agency for the project; AMBAG helped get a \$100,000 state grant to study water use in the area.

"It isn't a full management plan by any means," Van Houten said, "but we might as well start with water."

AMBAG has selected a consultant,

Questa Engineering Corp. of Port Richmond, and a subcontractor, Habitat Restoration Group of Felton, along with the technical advisory committee. All will be introduced to the public tonight.

AMBAG regional planner Frank Barron stressed that water management and not land use is the immediate focus.

Barron said a monitoring program is planned "to fill in the information gaps," and "a hydrologic study ... to determine the sources of pollution as much as we can. We'll be looking at ... industrial, commercial and residential sources."

Agricultural pollution sources also will be examined, Barron said, along with the Buena Vista landfill, the former city dump and the airport.

"We're trying to stay away from the development issue for now," Barron said.

Another factor in area wetlands development could be Proposition 180 on the California ballot June 7.

The Parks and Wildlife Initiative, popularly known as CALPAW '94, would authorize and issue \$2 billion in bonds to acquire, protect and develop wildlife habitats and other open spaces.

According to Watsonville City Council member Oscar Rios, who supports the measure, it would set aside \$1 million to preserve Watsonville-area wetlands.